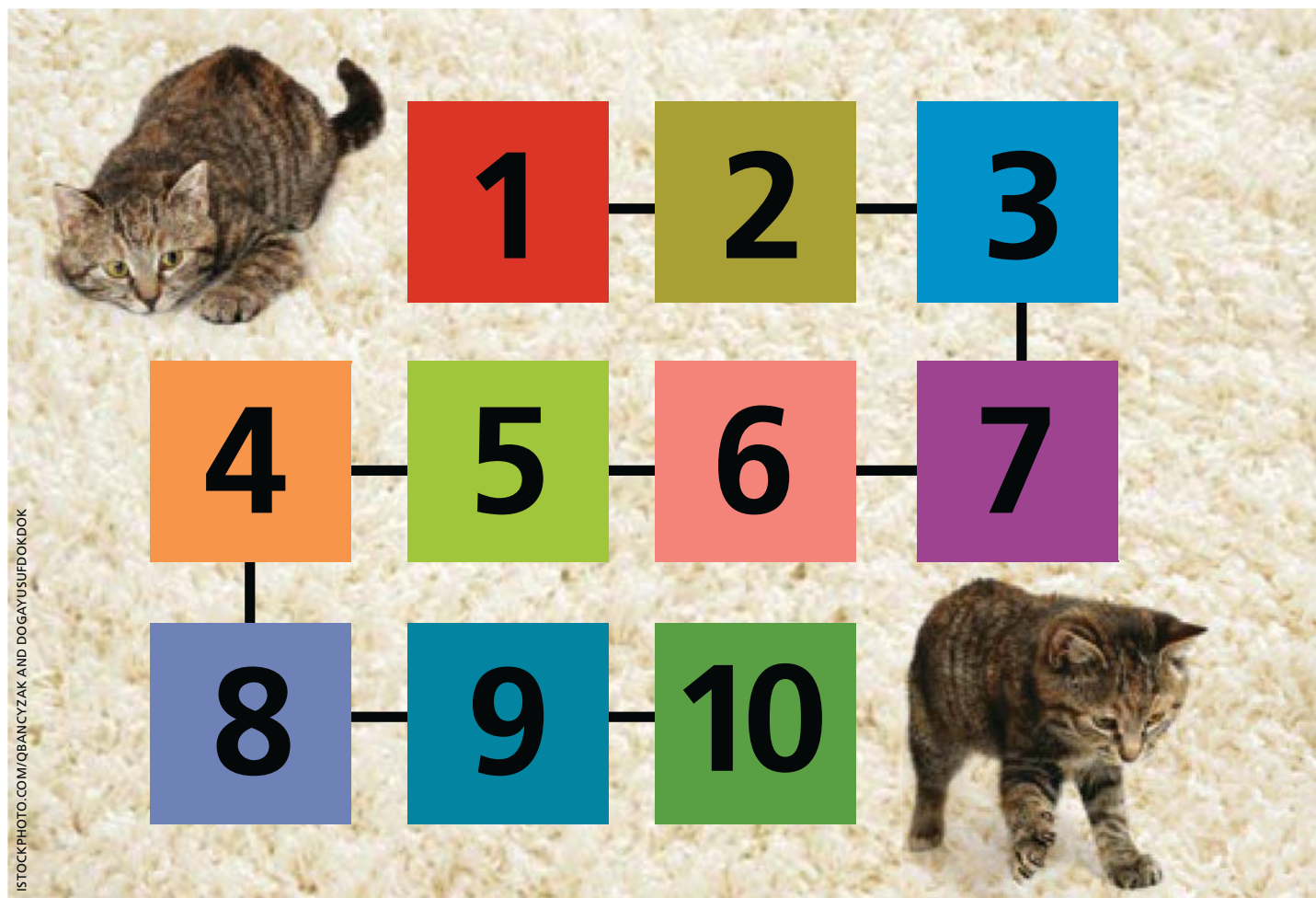


Turning Fearful Cats Friendly

Training method aims to make frightened cats more adoptable

BY ANGELA DRAKE RENTFRO



My cat Archie is my confident, affectionate, cuddle-bug cat. He melts in my arms for attention. But if he ever got lost and wound up in an animal shelter, he might quickly deteriorate into an “unadoptable” fearful cat. Potential adopters might walk by his cage and not give more than a brief glance at my gorgeous orange tabby. Archie would be practically invisible, crouching in the back of his cage in his litter box. If not for his microchip and ID tags, he might well end up euthanized.

People gravitate to cats who sit confidently at the front of their cages with their head, body, and tail held high. We all know that the more friendly cats seem, the more

likely people are to interact with them, which can lead to adoptions. As a longtime animal rescue foster parent and trap-neuter-return (TNR) volunteer, I have a special place in my heart for all of the feral cats and fearful cats who do not meet adoptability criteria, and thus are not likely to ever achieve their happily-ever-after ending. They are truly the underdogs (or undercats!) in the animal welfare world. Fearful or feral cats are not a lost cause; rather, they are a puzzle in need of a solution.

A Better Way for Fearful Cats

I am impressed when I walk through an animal shelter and see cats and kittens put-

ting on the charm for their ever-changing audience. Some cats adapt beautifully to change—and a shelter setting is usually a big one. For a lot of cats, change can be frightening. Exposure to the unfamiliar settings, sights, sounds, and smells of a new environment makes it more likely the cat will behave fearfully. You can take a friendly cat from the comforts of his home and see him quickly transform into a fearful cat who would not be a candidate for adoption in a shelter. How can we set these fearful cats up for success, so they can achieve their happy endings?

During my tenure volunteering for animal welfare organizations and caring for homeless cats, it became obvious to me that much

[behavior department]

common advice on handling cats—such as restraining them in towels—is often very stressful on the cat and potentially dangerous to people. The recommendations also tend to be limited to younger kittens, can be time-consuming (taking weeks, months, or years), and do not produce consistent results.

I was convinced that I could find a better way to help fearful and feral cats, so I pursued my master's degree at the University of North Texas' (UNT) behavior analysis department. The graduate program allows students to apply their knowledge of behavioral principles to a variety of areas to help humans and/or animals. Fortunately, I had the opportunity to be mentored by Dr. Jesús Rosales-Ruiz and play an active role in his applied animal behavior lab, known as the Organization for Reinforcement Contingencies with Animals (ORCA). The lab focuses on animal behavior research that improves the care and understanding of captive animals, and it offered me valuable guidance in animal behavior and training. Together, Dr. Rosales-Ruiz and I designed my master's thesis, *Fearful to Friendly*

(F2F): *Constructional Fear Treatment for Cats* and created an instructional F2F DVD.

The approach treats fear and aggression not as behavior triggered by the environment, but as "successful" behavior that minimizes or removes the threat. The treatment procedure involves the removal of low levels of threat (specifically, the presence of a person) as a reinforcer (reward) to shape friendly behaviors. When rewarded for friendly behaviors by having a stressor removed, the cat learns that behaving fearfully or aggressively will not cause the stressor to go away—but friendly behaviors will. We wanted to develop a fast, safe, systematic approach to turning feral cats and kittens into friendly companion animals and training fearful cats to show better in an adoption environment—but the F2F process is not limited to socializing feral and fearful cats. The procedure can be modified to help a wide variety of domestic and exotic fearful animals. The research was an extension of work Dr. Rosales-Ruiz and his students have done on fear and aggression in animals.

Getting Started

Before I implement the F2F procedure, I make sure the cat is comfortably housed in the top level of a cat condo located in a quiet room with minimal human traffic. Today, I will be working with a neutered 6-month-old gray tabby feral kitten named Marvin. Over the next two days, my objective is to progress through the five conditions of the F2F procedure: approaching the cat condo, opening the cage door, brushing him, getting Marvin to approach me, and petting him. Each of the five conditions are broken down into smaller goals called "shaping steps." Once these conditions are mastered, I will release him from the cat condo and work with him in other rooms in my house.

During the process, in the approaching condition, I place numbered sheets of paper on the floor, with the lowest number at the door and the highest number at the entrance to the cat condo. The overall goal is to reach the cat condo entrance, but I use numbered squares as smaller goals as I progress to the cage entrance. I walk toward the kitten in the cat condo, then stop at a preplanned destination and observe the kitten's behavior. I reward Marvin's friendly behavior by leaving the room for 15 to 30 seconds.

For example, at one point in the process, I move to a new shaping step by progressing from both feet on square five to left foot on square five and right foot on square six. From that position, I observe the kitten lying belly down with his head held low, his legs pulled in tightly to his body, and his tail tucked under his body. He is staring at me with wide, circular eyes. It is difficult to discern his eye color because his black pupils are enlarged despite the bright lights—a clear sign of stress. I know from previous experience that if I progress through my shaping steps too quickly, that will add too much pressure to the kitten, which results in more intense behaviors, such as hissing, growling, arching back, and hair standing up.

Since Marvin is a "statue cat"—essentially frozen and not offering many behaviors—I will reward him for small movements to get the shaping game going. F2F breaks down the overall goal of the kitten behaving in a friendly manner into smaller behaviors, such as blinking and stretching. I leave the room

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when Marvin breaks eye contact with me by turning his head slightly to the left—a desirable behavior because it’s the first movement he offers. On the next trial, I will return to the same location and wait for him to either offer me a better version of head turning (such as turning his head further away or in a new direction) or for him to offer a new behavior, such as blinking or moving his tail or legs further away from his body.

The trials are brief, lasting approximately one minute. I am looking for the slightest changes in behavior, so I can deliver a reward, which often keeps the game fun so the kitten will keep playing. At a later point in the process, I am nearing the cage door as I progress to square 21. However, before I can reach my destination, the kitten pulls his body back away from me, tucking more tightly into the corner of the cage. This distancing movement is considered an undesirable behavior, so I

freeze at square 19 and wait for a few seconds for him to relax and offer a friendly behavior. On an unsuccessful trial (one where an undesirable behavior occurred), I am looking for the slightest acceptable behavior for which I can quickly issue a reward, so that I can keep the trial brief. I do not want to put any unnecessary pressure on an already frightened animal by lingering. The time to learn is not when the kitten is stressed out, but rather when he is relaxed. For that reason, I will work on obtaining more desirable behaviors on successful trials (those where the kitten is only emitting desirable behaviors).

Marvin watches me for a moment and then I notice his eyelids quivering, and I respond by leaving the room. I am very generous on unsuccessful trials and will reward for the slightest desirable behavior (such as an eye flutter). Since this trial was unsuccessful

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ful at square 19, on the next trial I will backtrack slightly to square 18. I set the kitten up to succeed by returning to a prior shaping step where

he was successful, and then I proceed from there.

I have achieved my criterion for the approaching condition. I can walk from the room entrance to the cat condo entrance, and Marvin's behavior is friendly. I can repeat this several times and still he only offers friendly behaviors. Now I am ready to start the opening-the-cage-door condition.

I begin simply by raising one hand toward the cage door; if that succeeds, on the next trial I will raise both hands. As I progress, I can eventually pull the cage door down one inch from the cage door latch. The cage door condition concludes with me holding the horizontal cat condo door at waist level, completely open, creating a bridge between me and the feral kitten inside the cage.

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Marvin has now allowed the scary monster (me) into his cage. At this point in the procedure, he is lying on his side with all of his legs

stretched far away from his body. He is comfortably resting the side of his head on the cardboard cat scratcher. His pale green eyes are half closed, and his whiskers are relaxed, not flared apart. His tail is no longer tucked under his body. Instead, he proudly displays his exquisite tiger-striped tail by draping it off one side of the cat scratcher. When I open the room door, he now greets me by offering paw stretches and a variety of other previously reinforced behaviors.

I progress to the beginning stages of the brushing condition. I take my brush (taped to a wooden dowel) and inch my way closer to the kitten's head with each trial. At first, the dowel is long enough so that I can reach the kitten at any location in the cat condo without putting my hand near him. Over time, I

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gradually ease my hand up the length of the dowel, so that I am holding the brush; later, I will remove the wooden dowel altogether. My

objective is to be able to brush Marvin on both sides of his head, the top of his head, both sides of his body, along his backbone, and down his tail—all while he is behaving in a friendly manner.

Rewarding Friendly Behavior

After three hours of rewarding for friendly behaviors, I have almost completed the F2F procedure with the feral kitten in the top level of the cat condo. I can approach him in the cage, open the cage door, and brush him. At this point, I experience the beautiful moment that we deem the "switchover point," in which the reward for the kitten changes. I have switched from being an aversive stimulus to a positive stimulus. Marvin no longer demonstrates aggressive or fear-

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ful behaviors to try to escape or avoid me; instead, he emits friendly behaviors to solicit my attention. Now that the brushing condition is complete, I will come back this afternoon and do some follow-up brushing trials with Marvin.

The next day, I assess Marvin's behavior in the cat condo, and am greeted with a cheerful meow. Without any additional training, Marvin approaches me at the cage door—purring, rubbing against objects in the cage, holding his head, body, legs, and tail high, and allows me to pet him. He uses the cage door as a bridge to walk across to unite us as he confidently strides out of the safety of his cage to meet with his new companion. I am now ready to repeat the F2F procedure as needed to train Marvin to behave in a friendly way on the bottom level of the cat condo and outside of the cage (which is known as generalization training).

The F2F results have been outstanding. The results of my master's thesis show that going from fearful to friendly can be done in a matter of hours. After the implementation of F2F, "unadoptable" feral kittens were behaving in friendly ways, approaching people, and soliciting petting in the condo. When a feral or fearful cat meets adoptability criteria in the cat condo, then we assess his behavior in new environments (new rooms in a house, in a foster environment, etc.) and with new people. In cases where generalization of friendly behaviors does not occur, generalization is programmed by repeating the F2F procedure in those environments. The more that you do the procedure, the faster it goes.

The F2F treatment package utilizes a constructional approach, meaning that we are constructing new friendly behaviors that we want to see more of rather than concentrating on reducing fear and aggression. In the F2F logic, the animals did not have emotional control—not because they were fearful, but because they did not know what else to do in those situations. The new behaviors the animal learns become so effective in getting the animal what he wants that the undesirable behaviors are no longer necessary, and thus are no longer presented.

F2F is designed to set the animal up for success and produce minimal stress. The threat, or aversive stimulus, is presented in such a way as not to produce an intense fear

Resources

Visit fearfultofriendly.com for information about the Fearful to Friendly procedure or to purchase the instructional DVDs *Fearful to Friendly (F2F): Constructional Fear Treatment for Cats* and *Behavior Identification Game for Cats*.

Kit Jenkins, grants manager for PetSmart Charities, offers advice on recognizing and reducing stress in cats in shelters or foster homes on the PetSmart Charities blog, linked at bit.ly/cl009q.

Information on the University of North Texas' Organization for Reinforcement Contingencies with Animals (ORCA) program is available at orgs.unt.edu/orca.

For more information, see *Animal Sheltering's* articles "Scaredy Cat or Feral Cat?" at animalsheltering.org/frightened_ferals; and "The Way to Tame a Feral Kitten's Heart," at animalsheltering.org/taming_feral_kittens.

response or a long-lasting fear response. The aim at each trial is to stay below the "fear threshold" where undesirable responses occur. The trainer changes his or her behavior according to changes in the cat's behavior. The subject is never wrong: if the cat is doing something the trainer does not like, then the trainer is likely doing something the cat does not like.

F2F offers a systematic solution to transform fearful behavior into friendly behavior. This procedure can be used to shape feral and fearful felines into affectionate companion cats who meet adoptability criteria. Fearful to Friendly is dedicated to all the frightened animals who were too scared and skittish to have the opportunity to find new homes. My wish is that this life-saving research will find its way to our fearful animal friends around the globe and give them their time to shine and the potential to find their happy endings. 